

School of Excellence Listening Session Guide

Your PTA can use this guide to facilitate discussions with families, educators and other key community stakeholders via listening sessions or focus groups. Email Excellence@PTA.org with any questions.

What is a community listening session?

A community listening session or focus group brings together a group of people to discuss a particular issue. A PTA may want to host a listening session for a variety of reasons including to get feedback on specific programs or initiatives, to have a dialogue on a recent community event or to more broadly offer an opportunity for families and other community stakeholders to share their thoughts and ideas.

Why host a community listening session?

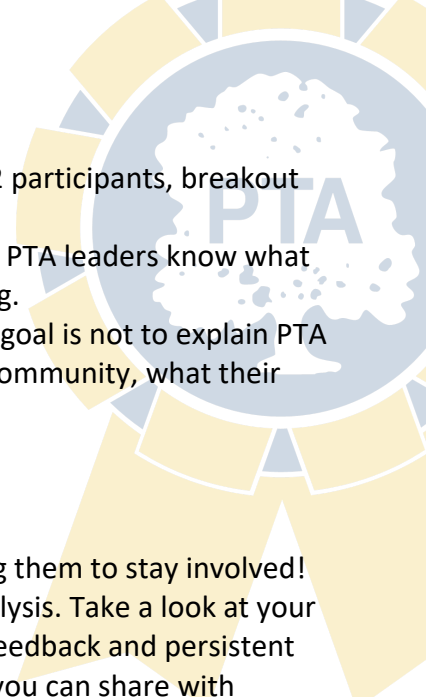
Listening sessions provide families, and others, the opportunity to express their opinions, share ideas and tell their stories. They are valuable to your PTA because they provide helpful feedback and suggestions and engage the community in a meaningful discussion. These exchanges with key stakeholders in your community will help your PTA identify and address areas for improvement.

Tips for Planning a Community Listening Session

1. **Choose a Venue.** Find a comfortable, easily accessible location. Questions to consider:
 - Is there enough space for 8-12 participants to sit comfortably?
 - Is the location convenient and accessible via public transportation?
 - Is the location wheelchair accessible? (Ramps, elevators, automatic doors, etc.)
 - Will participants be able to easily hear and see each other? (Lighting, acoustics, etc.)
2. **Choose a Time to Meet.** Be mindful that families have varied schedules and obligations and consider the following:
 - How long will your listening session be?
 - When will be most convenient for the participants you are trying to engage?
 - When will be a convenient time to get to the venue? (Consider traffic, parking, etc.)
 - Is the time you are choosing near a mealtime? If so, be sure to provide food.
3. **Develop a Recruitment Strategy to Maximize Participation.** Create a plan for reaching out to families and consider the following:
 - **Determine your target audience:** Connect with local partners that can promote the opportunity to your target audience(s), Conduct individualized outreach to invite participants—*we recommend starting with a phone call*, Choose a small incentive for participation—a gift card, a meal, a raffle prize etc.
 - **Remove barriers for participation:** Provide transportation or vouchers for public transportation, Provide childcare at the event, Send a reminder text the day before, asking participants to confirm their attendance.

During Your Listening Session

1. **Be Prepared & Welcoming.** Create an inclusive, relaxing environment and consider the following:
 - a. **Arrive early.** Ensure the space is ready, post signs so the room is easy to find.



- b. **Consider the size of your listening session.** If there are more than 8-12 participants, breakout into smaller groups so everyone can participate and be heard.
2. **Capture demographic information.** Capturing demographic information helps PTA leaders know what communities are represented in the conversation and which voices are missing.
3. **Be aware of your assumptions and stay in listening and learning mode.** Your goal is not to explain PTA or advocate for PTA. Your goal is to gather information about people in your community, what their experiences have been, and what their priorities are.

After Your Listening Session

1. **Thank Your Participants.** Send an email thanking participants and encouraging them to stay involved!
2. **Analyze the data.** You don't need to be a statistics expert to conduct data analysis. Take a look at your notes from the listening session and identify key themes, recurring trends in feedback and persistent areas of concern. Summarize what you found into a few bullets or slides that you can share with others.
3. **Reach out to key stakeholders.** Once you've compiled families' feedback and concerns, determine who the key players are who can help you to address some of these issues. Consider reaching out to share your findings with your school principal, superintendent, school board, city council, your PTA Board and members and any community partners.
4. **Circle back to your listening session participants.** The listening session participants offered their time and their perspectives. It's important that your PTA honors that commitment by re-engaging the participants to share the results with them and invite them to stay involved and to join the PTA.

Facilitate the Community Listening Session

Agenda 45-60 min. (Depending on the group size)

- Welcome, Introductions & Overview (10 min.)
- Group Questions and Discussion (30-45 min.)
- Closing & Next Steps (5 min.)

Listening Session Overview: Begin the session with introductions, include names and PTA role, and overview of the purpose behind the session and the School of Excellence program:

- We are participating in the National PTA School of Excellence program, which grows partnerships between PTAs and schools to enrich the educational experience and overall well-being of all students. As part of the process outlined by National PTA, we are here to learn more about and reflect on your experience at this school. Your feedback will provide us with more information to implement an action plan for continuous school improvement.
- We're going to discuss your experience with the PTA, the ways you're most interested in engaging, and how we can better serve you. We know it's possible that you may not want to engage with the PTA for a variety of reasons. Whatever your experience—good or bad— we'd like to hear it today.
- Once developed, we will share our action plan to continue this conversation and help us bridge the gaps and needs in our school community.

Discussion Questions for Listening Sessions

Below you will find the required discussion questions for School of Excellence listening session. For each of the



six [National Standards for Family School Partnership](#) outlined below, **you must use at least the provided discussion question** and, if you need to prompt further conversation, may also use the optional probes.

Standard 1 – Welcome All Families

- What does the school/PTA do that makes you feel welcome in the community? How can the school/PTA be more welcoming to you and your family?
- *Optional Probes*
 - How does the school/PTA acknowledge and respect your family’s cultural and linguistic identity/identities?
 - How does the school/PTA help to foster meaningful relationships between you and other families in the community?

Standard 2 – Communicate Effectively

- How would you describe communication between families and the school (teachers and school administrators)? What changes could the school/PTA implement to make communication more effective?
- *Optional Probes*
 - What methods does the school use to communicate with you and how effective is each method?
 - What are the topics of communication between you and your child’s teacher? What information are you receiving and what information would you like to receive?

Standard 3 – Support Student Success

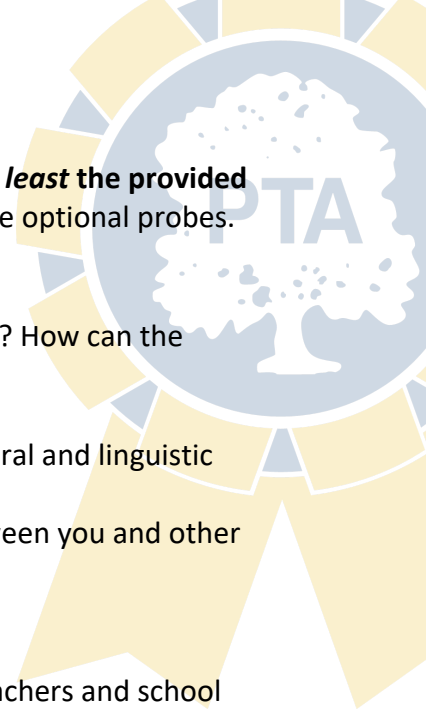
- How do you partner with your child’s teachers to support their success and gain a clear understanding of your child’s progress?
- *Optional Probes*
 - How does the school/PTA help you understand your child’s academic performance (grades, test scores, etc.) and areas for improvement?
 - How does the school/PTA help you understand how you can support your child’s social, emotional and academic development?

Standard 4 – Speak Up for Every Child

- When you have a question or concern, how does the school/PTA support you in resolving the issue?
- *Optional Probes*
 - How does the school/PTA remove barriers so that all families have the opportunity to engage meaningfully in their child’s education?
 - What opportunities does the school/PTA provide for you to meaningfully contribute to the school community?

Standard 5 – Share Power

- How does the school/PTA include you in making decisions that affect your child and all children at the school?
- *Optional Probes*
 - What committees or groups can families join to contribute to decisions that affect different aspects of school life (i.e. the school budget, the curriculum, operations, etc.)?



- How does your child's teacher include you in creating or modifying the academic or behavioral goals and plans for your child?

Standard 6 – Collaborate with Community

- How does the school/PTA engage community partners to support student success?
- *Optional Probes*
 - How does the school/PTA help you find services and opportunities (i.e., housing support, food banks, summer programs, after school activities) to support your child and family?
 - What services do community partners offer to you and other families?

